Four Years After--So Who Really Killed JFK?

'Post Has Purported 'Major New Study'

By DON BACON
(The Times-Picayune National Service)

WASHINGTON — Just four years ago, an assassin—or were there more than one?—took the life of President John F. Kennedy.

This week, as sort of an anniversary gesture, the Saturday Evening Post is featuring on its cover a ghostly picture of the late President together with a story inside that purports to be "a major new study" revealing that "three assassins killed Kennedy."

The article, says Post editor William A. Emerson Jr., "demolishes the Warren Report," which was issued by the government 10 months after the Dallas tragedy of Nov. 22, 1963, and which named a distraught left-wing loner, Lee Harvey Oswald, as the sole assassin.

But does the Post expose "demolish" the Warren Report? Have any of the widely publicized criticisms that have been directed against the Warren Report during the last two years really destroyed its basic conclusions?

ANSWER 'NO'

The answer, to one who has followed the official investigation from the beginning and who has attempted to analyze what has been said about it, must be a qualified no.

The report has so far weathered the storm stirred by the horde of independent amateur investigators. It has been damaged, to be sure, but it remains still afloat.

It still offers the least complex and most credible explanation of what happened that afternoon as the presidential motorcade made a sharp southwest turn onto Elm st. and drove past the Texas School Book Depository.

The amateur investigators — or assassination cult, as they have become—still spend much of their time poring over the thick, blue-covered report of "The President's Commission on the Assassination of President John F. Kennedy" and the 26 volumes of related testimony, exhibits and other miscellaneous data pertaining to the Dallas events.

WARREN WEAKNESSES

Their sleuthing, particularly that done in 1966 by a young scholar named Edward Jay Epstein, has pointed out numerous weaknesses in the commission's investigative methods, its unproved theories and its presentation of the facts.

Epstein and others have demonstrated rather conclusively that the Warren Commission did not cover every inch of ground, did not interview every single witness and did not weigh every bit of evidence before writing its final report.

What they have not shown, however, is that the commission erred in its conclusion.

As much as they have examined and reexamined the testimony and evidence stored in the National Archives, as diligent as they have been in tracking down old and new witnesses and as conscientious as they have generally been in applying scientific techniques to their investigative efforts, not one of them has uncovered a single shred of important new evidence that would either clear Oswald or link him to an assassination plot.

No one can ever say for certain that no such plot existed—and that, more than anything else, is what feeds the doubtful

minds of the cultists.

'NEW STUDY'

Comes now the latest "new study," which the Post publishes in part in its current issue and which will be available soon in book form. It is by Josiah Thompson, a 32-year-old philosophy professor at Haverford College in Pennsylvania.

Thompson was a student at Yale University when the assassination occurred, and he doubted from the beginning that Oswald did it. About a year ago, he became actively interested in proving his assumption and has been one of the National Archives' steady customers ever since.

He has spent many hours reviewing the 8mm home movies of the assassination taken by Abraham Zapruder and has perfected a method of using two projectors to study still slides of the death scene, flashing one and then the other to simulate movement.

He has also gone to Dallas to reinterview several witnesses, whose testimony he believes got short shrift from the Warren Commission. On a Sunday morning when the traffic is light, he has stood in Dealey Plaza and with an Abney level, which he has learned to use he has measured the angles of trajectory of the bullets that hit Kennedy and Texas Gov. John Connally.

BORROWED IDEAS

He has also borrowed ideas and data first presented by other doubters.

Thompson now believes that he has proved that not one but at least three assassins were lying in wait for the President as his black Lincoln rolled slowly by the Texas School Book Depository, or T.S.B.D., as he and other buffs refer to the building where the Warren Commission said all the shots were fired.

One assassin, Thompson asserts, was stationed atop a building on Houston st., opposite the T.S.B.D., another was standing on the bumper of a car and peering over a five-foot-high stockade fence that ran along the crest of a grassy knoll in front of the Kennedy automobile. A third assassin (not Lee Harvey Oswald, who was innocently drinking a soda pop on the first floor) was perched at the sixth floor corner window of the T.S.B.D.

Before the motorcade arrived, Thompson has determined, two suspicious automobiles circled the plaza and parking lot behind the fence on the grassy knoll. The driver of one car was seen talking into a radio microphone.

HERTZ SIGN

As the big Hertz rent-a-car sign atop the T.S.B.D. flashed 12:30 o'clock, the assassin in that building squeezed the trigger on his rifle. One and a half seconds later, a second shot rang out from the roof of the Houston st. building. Then came a third shot from the T.S.B.D., and finally a final shot from the grassy knoll.

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Three assassins, Thompson insists, where the Warren Commission found only the demented Oswald.

If Thompson's theory were true, it would solve the most puzzling aspect of the assassination: How a poor marksman like Oswald, using a $13 bolt-action rifle, could fire three deadly accurate shots in only six seconds.

The Warren Commission concluded that it was possible. It theorized that Oswald's first shot passed through the President's body, then proceeded on through Connally's chest and wrist and into his leg. Oswald's second shot missed, and the third shot crashed into Kennedy's skull.

BULLET HIT BOTH

A crucial point in the Warren Report is that the first bullet hit both the President and the governor. The Zapruder film showed that only 1.6 seconds lapsed between the President's first reaction to being hit and Connally's first reaction. It takes 2.3 seconds to work the bolt on Oswald's rifle; therefore he could not have fired twice to hit both men.

More than any other point in the Warren Report, critics have tried to disprove the "single-bullet" theory.

Connally strongly insists that he was not hit by that first shot. The bullet, which the commission claims went through two men's bodies and splintered the wrist of one of them, was later found on Connally's stretcher. It was in perfect condition, to the amazement of ballistics experts.

The "single bullet" theory is the weakest link in the Warren Commission theory, but it could have happened that way, as the Columbia Broadcasting System demonstrated in an impressive research effort last summer.

CBS TROUBLE

CBS went to the trouble and expense of hiring leading scientists to conduct ballistics tests in the laboratory. It constructed a six-story tower to simulate the Texas School Book Depository window where the assassin presumably crouched. It built a track to propel dummy figures by the tower at 11 miles per hour — the exact speed of the Kennedy car — and had many amateur and professional riflemen shoot at the figures with a 6.5mm Mannlicher-Carcano rifle identical to the assassination weapon.

CBS went to far more pains than the official investigators had gone in 1964. But, even so, its investigators had to conclude that the original Warren assumption was probably correct: There was one assassin, who fired three shots.

Thompson ignores CBS's research, just as he ignores other items of information that do not fit his theory. It is typical of most of the critical reports. Like a lawyer preparing a brief, there is a tendency to select those bits of data that will help prove a case and gloss over the data that damage it.

NO ACCOUNTING

In the Thompson theory, there is no accounting for the three empty cartridges that the Dallas Police found by the window of the School Book Depository. Thompson asserts that only two shots were fired from there; if so, why doesn't he explain that other spent cartridge? And, why were no cartridges found behind that fence or on the roof of that other building?

He relies heavily on the handful of witnesses who say they heard four shots, but passes over the preponderance of witnesses, including all the professional observers present (protective agents and reporters) who heard only three. And, of course, there is no mention of the several witness-

es who heard only two.

He connects to the assassination a host of suspicious characters, who obviously have made elaborate plans and have at least one automobile equipped with a two-way radio. With that much planning and the use of modern electronics, is it reasonable to think they chose as their weapon a slow-firing Italian war surplus rifle with a cheap telescopic sight?

THOMPSON BOLSTERS

Thompson bolsters his theory by pointing out that the President's body jerked in the wrong direction shortly after he had been hit by the fatal bullet. He explains this by surmising that Kennedy was hit almost simultaneously by another shot from the front (the grassy knoll) and that the impact from this fourth shot knocked him backward. Others might find it more logical to assume that Secret Service Agent William R. Greer, who was driving, accelerated the car

and that Kennedy's limp body was thrown back by inertia.

There are other holes in the Thompson theory, as there are in the ones that preceded it, including the Warren Report. It becomes pointless to try to examine them all.

Perhaps some day, one of the assassination buffs will solve "The Greatest Murder Mystery of the Age." It is their ambition and dream. Millions of Americans are waiting anxiously to learn if New Orleans District Attorney James Garrison is really on the track of an assassination plot, or if he is trying to squeeze some personal notoriety out of a national tragedy.

The buffs believe in Garrison, and some of them are suppressing their almost overpowering urge to theorize until after Garrison brings to trial the man he has accused of involvement in an assassination plot.

AMATEURS FOLLOW

Meanwhile, the amateurs follow an increasingly cold trial. Most buffs are forced by circumstance and choice to rely almost exclusively on the 26 volumes of Warren Commission testimony for their information. For many of them, trying to find the "real assassins" from the existing data has become a game, like solitaire, to fill otherwise lonely hours.

Before the assassination bug bit them, many were avid detective story readers. Most also seem to share a general distrust for government and a belief in conspiratorial politics.

The true believers have virtually drummed young Epstein out of the corps because he went through an elaborate process of dismantling the Warren Commission report and still concluded that Oswald was the killer.

They are more friendly to young David Lifton, an engineering student, who has theorized that the grassy knoll was hollowed out by the conspirators and artificial trees were used to cover up their hiding place.